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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the model behind net2art, a joint Nordic project of creating a platform for Nordic net art. The project's background and scope, organization, impact and experiences, funding structures, and copyright issues are covered. The paper argues that museums do not have a natural role in the distribution of net art (i.e., art that is made for, by use of, on, and/or with the Internet as the decisive technical or conceptual prerequisite), that the conservation tradition and expertise of museums do not make them suited for creating historical collections of net art without undergoing major upgrading, and that older art institutions have shown a superficial understanding of net art. Other relevant institutions that have established themselves on the Internet are described, including socially-based link selections, personal link selections, liberally moderated link selections/guides, moderated electronic discussion forums, unmoderated mailing lists and open networks, collections curated in the net art environment, and collections curated by offline art institutions. (MES)

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Hacking Culture

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http://n2art.nu

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Abstract

This paper argues that museums do not have a natural role in the distribution of net art, that the conservation tradition and expertise of museums do not make them suited for creating historical collections of net art without undergoing major upgrading, and that older art institutions have shown a superficial understanding of net art. Other relevant institutions already have established themselves on the Internet.

Although net art does not need museums, one can still see how museums of contemporary art need net art. Public museums of contemporary art are meant to cover the whole field of contemporary art, and therefore they must necessarily also cover net art. If museums have to take net art seriously, they have to start with the already established competencies and viable forums outside the museums. Museums that wish to cover net art should join these forums. For the sake of the reputation of museums in the net art environment, it is essential that they do not appear to be parasites or "lusers" - mere users of net art who just download the resulting works of art without contributing to their structural strengthening and the more process-oriented development.

Keywords: net art; n2art; digital culture; dissemination; preservation; network art

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Introduction

During the last three years, CultureNet Denmark (www.kulturnet.dk) along with the established cultural institutions in Denmark, has been actively working with projects digitizing and communicating cultural legacy to a broad net audience. In concert with colleagues in Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Finland, CultureNet Denmark has also created a platform for Nordic net art, n2art, hence working closely together with net artists and curators of net art. As an institution we have learned significantly from working concurrently in the areas of institutional establishment and more anarchistic playgrounds. As individuals we have benefited greatly from counting administrators of traditional organizations as well as unconventional avant-gardes and techno nodes among our colleagues and inspirational partners.

This paper will present the model behind the joint Nordic project of creating a platform for Nordic net art (http://n2art.nu), and continue to focus the cultural political questions of the relationship between net art and the 'art institution', which is particularly relevant to the discussion of net art – are net art and the museum incompatible operating system? The questions revolves around a central problem at a time when archiving and communicating our digital cultural heritage is under general

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debate, and at a time when several works of net art have already been lost for posterity. Net art not only involves practical or technical aspects, but to a large extent also what could be called ideological aspects, which considerably complicates the discussion on communicating net art.

New media represents a constantly shifting frontier for experimentation and exploration. While new media are understood in terms of course of the older media that precede them, they are nonetheless freed, at least to some extent, from traditional limitations. Having to figure out how new tools work, calls for innovation and encourages a kind of beginner's mind. New media attract innovators, trendsetters and risk takers. As a result some of the hottest creative minds spend their time hacking around with new technologies that we barely understand. We need to connect and interact with these designers of the future.

Because of their newness, new media are slightly beyond the effective reach of established institutions and our bureaucracy. Net art is a case in point. While museums started to catch on to the Internet as an art medium in the last years of the nineties and began to collect, commission and exhibit net-based artworks, most artists who interest them actually made their names *outside* the gallery-museum matrix. This reluctance of establishment and the freedom of the net art come at a cost. Galleries and museums serve a very important interpretive function. Museums have the qualifying ability to focus the attention of critics and audiences, to situate the artwork in a historical context, to allocate time and space for us to experience the work itself, and – not least – to preserve and protect what will be the cultural heritage of tomorrow.

Even so we are also faced with the paradox, that the Internet is the perfect tool to bring down all hierarchy and bring art and culture directly to the audience. Neither the artist nor the art institutions or the viewer have the limited roles of the past any more. What role are we to play, then, as institutions, as artists, as audience? Art – and in a general sense culture – has always been bound up with new technology, and artists have always been among the first to adopt new technologies as they emerge. Still, it sometimes seems, that the technological frontiers of art making and communication of culture is a frontier the *institutions* of arts and culture fear to tread.

The paradox of net art

In this paper, net art is understood as art, which is made for, by use of, on and/or with the Internet as the decisive technical or conceptual prerequisite. Net art is a largely anarchic artistic genre, which defines itself in opposition to the hierarchical art institution, which apparently 'dictates' what art is. Net art can be expressed in many different ways, and is broadly defined as network art in which communication is the central focal point, which means it is not necessarily bound to the Internet. In this regard, the focus is on works of Internet art in which the Internet is crucial for the work of art, hence raising particular questions of dissemination and presentation.

It is paradoxical that net art – by virtue of its criticism of the art institution – will always remain a part of this same institution, because – in one way or another – it is this positioning which makes it possible for us to discuss Internet art as an art form at all. And the very first idea of creating a joint Nordic platform for net art rested on this understanding.

The challenge posed by net art to the hierarchical structure of the art institution has a precursor in avant-garde art, which attempted to eliminate the distinction between art and non-art by challenging the art institution. The elimination of this distinction can only be of importance inside the institutional framework, because the framework makes the act that is taking place visible, of which Marcel Duchamp's Fountain (1917) is a classic example.

n2art – a platform for Nordic net art

During 2000 the five Nordic CultureNets initiated, developed and implemented a Nordic platform for net art: http://n2art.nu.

What are the limits of an artwork that is part of an overall discourse on the impact of the Internet on cultural and societal developments? The concept of what is art becomes difficult to establish, because it is clear that net art seldom can be viewed as fully autonomous art objects.

n2art as a process and a project was not intended to formulate a solution to this problem, but to point out some of the paradoxes involved in net art and the institutionalisation of net art; The five Nordic CultureNets each act on behalf of the five Nordic ministries of culture, hence representing a highly bureaucratic and administrative structure. On the other hand all five CultureNets thrive on the notion and concept of network; working in a decentralised zone of national culture. In a sense the concept of CultureNet is in itself a paradox between centre and periphery of cultural establishment.

n2art is a platform for net art, an exhibition of new art forms, but it is of course also a political construction, a prototype for Nordic co-operation, an experimental funding structure for net art. And n2art is a cultural statement. n2art is the first common Nordic project within the national CultureNets. The purpose of n2art is to establish a curated exhibition venue for net art in the Nordic region. The National CultureNets operate under the Ministry of Culture in the different Nordic Countries. But above all n2art is an experiment, an "Observatory of Premonition" – to borrow an expression from the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

Background & Scope

n2art began as a digression, as a restless idea in the hearts and minds of the directors of the Scandinavian CultureNets. The CultureNet directors from Sweden, Norway and Denmark had long shared a common dream of inventing and implementing a joint Nordic project that would not only pave the way for Nordic co-operation in general – perhaps even pave the way for a Nordic CultureNet – but also be an expression of Nordic culture on the Internet. From the beginning it was very important to us to define a project that would in a way transcend national boundaries and stereotypes of national culture, as well as make use of the fact, that all Nordic CultureNets are situated in the magic and very intense field between culture and IT, between art and new technology.

So we chose net art; artworks designed to an only accessible on the Internet – the media of no nationality. And we were very grateful when Menningarnet (CultureNet Iceland) and Kuultturisampoo (CultureNet Finland), embraced the idea and joined the project - extending it from a Scandinavian project to a full-hearted Nordic project - as was the

intention. This made n2art a shared project between the CultureNets in Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Denmark.

The purpose of n2art was to create an exhibition venue where the works of art are placed in a context, in which they are presented and annotated. The works of art have been selected by a group of 5 Nordic curators. As an experiment, it is the hope that a project like n2art will make a difference also in a political sense; that is by, increasing the recognition of this form of art and the necessity for supporting it: n2art was the first publicly funded net art site in the Nordic region. But above all n2art is important as a continued commitment on an institutional level to this form of art and discourse. So it was with great satisfaction, that we made it possible for n2art to live on – beyond our commitment – and develop within NIFCA, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art founded and supported by Nordic Council of Ministers.

Organisation

From the very beginning it was decided to establish a parallel structure of the project dividing the focus of administration and funding from the focus of content. And this was done by establishing a Directors Board and a Curators Board, the latter consisting of one handpicked curator from each of the five participating nations.

- Over all project management and responsibility was assigned to CultureNet Denmark.
- Server management and development was assigned to ArtNet Norway being a sector net of CultureNet Norway.

The main purpose of this parallel structure was to secure the quality of the content and doing so by headhunting very competent curators and granting them the means and space for focusing only on which artworks to present. Curators Board was then given the exclusive responsibility of the content of n2art. Whereas Directors Board took care of management, administration and economy. This structure proved very efficient and productive. The sole project management and curatorial development is now conducted by NIFCA.

As a joint project n2art was not only founded on political and administrative consensus between 5 national CultureNet directors, but is also based on the artistic agreement by the 5 specially chosen curators, one from each country. All in all n2art is the result of the strong desire to co-operate - not only among the CultureNets and the directors, but also among the curators. One of the pioneers of net art, Roy Ascott, has rightly emphasized that 'networking' has been a symbol of the culture during the last decade of the 20th Century, and will continue to be one in the 21st Century. The project administration of n2art has the rare honour of participating in the realization of Ascott's prophesy

Impact & Experiences

Working with and managing the n2art project has offered CultureNet Denmark a unique experience in planning and conducting pan national joint projects. But mostly n2art has offered CultureNet Denmark familiarity with the field of net art, and we wished to place this experience and competence at the disposal of the Danish Ministry of Culture, the establishment of Danish Cultural institutions, the net art communities as

well as the general public.

The questions faced working with n2art was mainly questions of:

- Funding structures
- Copy right
- 'Preservation'
- Dealing with net art as the cultural heritage of the future

Funding structures

In order to print a book, one needs a printing house. In comparison to the cost of establishing a printing house, the cost of printing a greater number of books is minimal. When one has established a printing house, one might as well print a thousand books. In order to operate a network server to host a work of net art of average complexity, one needs a computer, software, a good Internet connection that is always accessible, and a full-time technician. When this is established, one might as well host a thousand works of net art at an insignificantly higher cost.

If we at first wish to offer the most important net artists good opportunities, the price of offering good services to a broad selection of artists will merely be slightly higher. Therefore funding collective solutions - for example through supporting service providers, can to a great extent carry out public stimulation of net art. Hence we chose to establish a server environment for n2art, hosted by Artnet Norway.

The lesson learned is that support of net art and –artists can be conducted rather easy, cheap and effective, by providing server facilities. It can even be conducted by larger museums …

Copy right

Since net artists are not sufficiently economically supported through the consumption of their work, net artists are not that concerned with copyright. The basis for netart is an economy of *exchange*. Pecuniary economy has been introduced during the last two years but still exchange remains the most important. This exchange is interlinked with the free software community – net artists tend to use free software and net artists that develop software tend to share this with the netart community. Often source code is distributed in extensive friendship/colleague networks or even publicly for download. Software developed by the free software community is often protected by anti commercial licenses, for example by the common GNU, General Public Use license. (**http://biomatic.org/text.php?id=55**). Net artists dealing with this exchange are concerned about copyright only in the sense that the work stays free/part of the exchange.

'Preservation' of net art – mission impossible?

One important purpose of museums and libraries is the conservation of artefacts. While libraries conserve serially produced artefacts, art museums often work with unique artefacts and artefacts that have very few copies. In order to conserve unique artefacts, a tradition of selection is used, as well as an ideology that defends singling out some artefacts as more important than others. We cannot collect everything - if only for practical and economic reasons. Institutions that collect serially produced

artefacts can afford a greater breadth and a less exclusive ideology.

The number of duplicates is seldom relevant in net art. Firstly, a duplicate can be distributed to its entire audience through the Internet. Secondly, duplicates can really be produced, and 'copies' can replace 'originals'. Technically it is possible to conserve all net art - depending on which conservation methods one chooses to use. However, the collection of digital information does not require less conservation technical expertise than the collection of artefacts. Still, this is presumably not sufficient to defend an exclusive conservation ideology similar to the one to which art museums traditionally adhere.

The tradition of conserving a selection of artefacts requires that we during our own time can see what is important in our time - and especially what will be important for the future. This is a quite arrogant idea. Perhaps future historians will focus on different tendencies in our time, depending on their own ideological framework. We know precious little about the ideology and culture of the future. Presumably, we will do our descendants a favour by trying to document our own time as broadly as possible.

As a starting point, the collection of net art should be modelled on literature rather than the visual arts. In Denmark for example, the National Library would perhaps be a more relevant collector of Net art than the National Gallery. However, one has to bear in mind that the National Gallery and its relations are active in the artistic discourse in a completely different way from the National Library. Do we perhaps need the National Gallery as a guide to net art and as an institution that can pick out quality?

Net art and the museums

In a number of different ways, net art can be understood through an art institutional discourse, yet this does not mean that one can or should unproblematically and uncritically integrate net art into the institution. Net art is first and foremost a part of the context of the Internet. Therefore it is problematic when net art is exhibited in a museum, gallery, or on a museum's website, without the individual institution specifically relating to the artistic idioms of the Internet and drawing upon the discourse on the Internet/technology as part of the context of the artwork. Most often a museum's approach to net art is to view net art merely as the cultural heritage of tomorrow. Which of course is true! Yet net art cannot be fixed in time.

Although net art to a certain degree is dependent on an institutional framework, it is at the same time clear that the established art institution so far has not been capable of fulfilling this function. Works of net art cannot be institutionalised as autonomous art objects isolated from the context of the Internet, because they relate to the artistic idioms and discourse of the Internet. It is dynamic art, the significance of which arises out of the encounter between the artwork, the audience, and the context.

If one adds the institutional criticism by net art to the sluggishness of art institutions, it is not surprising that net art has developed its own institutions. In this context, one can point to private 'net art institutions' such as Rhizome in USA (http://rhizome.org/fresh/), ArtNet in Norway (http://kunst.kulturnett.no/artikkel.php?navn=artnet), and Artnode

(http://www.artnode.dk/) in Denmark, as well as mailing lists such as nettime, which has grown on the Internet, as important disseminators of net art, because they support dialogue with and about net art and the Internet. Unlike the established art institution, these independent institutions are all a product of the Internet focused on net art and the impact of the Internet on cultural and societal development.

Virtual institutions such as Rhizome, ArtNet Norway, and Artnode Denmark purposefully incorporate the Internet in their cultural dissemination, because they are able to create an environment around the net art in which interested people can contribute to the discussion and exchange knowledge, and in this way participate in building and developing a network. Unlike the isolating framework of the art institution, the framework of the virtual institution can be characterized as the network that arise around net art. In other words, the Internet is not just an empty distribution and dissemination channel for net art. Instead, the Internet is of crucial importance for the art experience that is being disseminated, because the Internet is the context and reference point of both the virtual institutions and the works of art.

The task of museums is to conserve and disseminate works of art, but this task implies taking artworks out of their original context and isolating them as testimonies of times past, which is a problem for Internet art, in which the context is such an integral part of the artworks. In this regard, net art's own institutions contribute with a framework that is founded on the discourse on net art and the Internet. What is lacking then is the systematic collection and preserving for future dissemination and documentation, even if organizations such as ArtNet Norway, Artnode Denmark and Rhizome are striving at archiving the works, they present.

By focusing on the role of the established art institution in relation to net art, a project like n2art was bringing an essential discussion into the public debate. This is a discussion that not only has a practical aspect, but also an ideological aspect, which forces us to take a critical view of the art institution.

The institutions of net art

While painters and writers often are dependent on galleries and publishers to distribute their work, net art is independent of these institutions. One can distribute art on the entire Internet without recognition from a single living soul. Almost. And net artists use increasingly advanced computers to produce and distribute their work. Net art is a relatively new field, but specialized institutions for dissemination and discussion have already appeared.

Socially-based link selections

Many selections of links to net art are based on a relation to a particular social environment. Typically, the project overviews located at media labs that are operated by artists are produced by their own users. While these link selections emphasize the community of the social environment from which they originate, they also contribute to obscuring the artists who are not connected to the media centre. These link selections are not an expression of an evaluation of what is interesting and what is less interesting. Therefore one cannot criticize them from an artistic point of view, and they have a passive function in the art discourse. Example: Atelier Nord (http://anart.no/index.html)

Personal link selections

Most Internet sites, independent of their genre, feature a selection of links. Most lists of links of this kind are based on personal preferences and have been more or less haphazardly put together. These link selections often do not distinguish between what is art and what is not art, and contribute to maintaining the unity of net art with other types of Internet culture. These kinds of selections are seldom put into a critical context and remain difficult, if not impossible, to criticize. All criticism can be repudiated with reference to personal preferences. Example: John Hopkin's site (http://neoscenes.net/)

Liberally moderated link selections/guides

Unmoderated link selections are related to guides such as Yahoo and Alta Vista. They contain a large selection of links with a minimum amount of descriptive or contextualizing text. Such sites have as their purpose to map the field of net art in the way it sees itself, but do not attempt actual evaluation of quality. Such unmoderated collections contribute to describing the field and thereby establish important distinctions between 'us' and 'them'. They can be criticized on a fundamental and not particularly interesting level. Examples: VeryBusy (http://verybusy.org) and Netartmuseum (http://netartmuseum.org)

Moderated electronic discussion forums

Electronic discussion forums are comparable to critical journals, as for example the journal NU on visual arts. These forums are the most authoritative in the field of net art. Whatever they discuss and focus on is of great importance for a broad environment, and typically they have an influence on the net art environment. A text describing a work of art that is written by a critic has a greater chance of being distributed than a single announcement by the artist. Hence, we see that critics are active in the distribution as an external institution on which the artist becomes dependent. These forums are based on voluntary contributions by subscribers. We can thus hardly criticize those who operate these forums for not dealing with a particular project or field. Their focus is the sum of whatever their contributors are focusing on. The responsibility for maintaining an overview of the discourse has been destroyed. We revert to a situation based on the personal evaluation by individual contributors. Examples: Rhizome (http://rhizome.org), Nettime (http://nettime.org), Recode (http://systemx.autonomous.org/recode/).

Unmoderated mailing lists and open networks

Unmoderated mailing lists and open networks are the most typical representatives of something both radically different and specific to the Internet. Through the use of such forums, a contributor can freely distribute materials to several thousand recipients. These kinds of forums are invaluable as the blood veins of net art. For someone who is not entirely familiar with the Internet and net art, this undergrowth of networks can be difficult to navigate through. It requires a great deal of time and some previous knowledge to gain full use of them. Examples: mailings lists: Rhizome_Raw and 7-11 (http://7-11.org), as well as Syndicate (http://colossus.v2.nl/syndicate/)and Nice (http://nice.x-i.nu/)

Collections curated in the net art environment

Net artists have for years chosen to display a selection of links to their audiences, and the word 'curate' has been used about this process. This curating has played an important role in the development of the self awareness of the net art environment. Curators are obliged to make professional choices. Such selections can therefore be criticized, and the criticism cannot be repudiated on the grounds that the selection is based on a social environment or personal preferences. Such selections are a part of the discourse, and are probably often used as reference points, but do not have greater influence on net art than the flood of information on mailing lists and open networks. Example: n2art (http://n2art.nu)

Collections curated by offline art institutions

Paradoxically, institutions lacking in competence often have the greatest authority among the general public when it comes to identifying interesting net art. The reference of a museum to net art can be based on, and be criticized for, well-established models of art. However, the problem is that the employees of the institution view net art based on these established models, while net artists often use completely different points of reference. The museum makes the framework for net art, not just practically, but also conceptually. It is not uncommon for museums to ask curators working with traditional art to put together an exhibition of net art. The curators choose traditional artists who have created a net artwork, or ask them to create a net artwork for the first time. In this way, presentations are made that may be 'innovative' in traditional art, but which are not seen as relevant on the Internet. Hence, we have a situation in which an audience is presented with net art that is not seen as representative among net artists themselves. Example: Whitney Museum of American Art
(http://www.whitney.org/exhibition/2kb/internet.html)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that museums do not have a natural role in the distribution of net art, that the conservation tradition and expertise of museums do not make them suited for creating historical collections of net art without undergoing major upgrading, and that older art institutions have shown a superficial understanding of net art. Another point is that relevant institutions already have established themselves on the Internet. Adaptations of net art to the traditions of museums would be inappropriately conservational - we would risk that the special experience enjoyed by net art would be lost.

Although net art does not need museums, one can still see how museums of contemporary art need net art. Public museums of contemporary art are meant to cover the whole field of contemporary art, and therefore they must necessarily also cover net art. If museums have to take net art seriously, they have to start with the already established competencies and viable forums outside the museums. Museums that wish to cover net art should join these forums. For the sake of the reputation of museums in the net art environment, it is essential that they do not appear to be parasites or lusers (a term used in hacker environments about people who merely use - and do not contribute to - the development of open programs) eg. mere users of net art who just download the resulting works of art without contributing to their structural strengthening and the more process-oriented development.

The popular understanding of new media identifies it with the use of a

computer for circulation and exhibition, rather than production. If we are to understand the effects of computerization on culture as a whole, this understanding is almost certainly too limiting. It would be logical to expect cultural forms and forms of dissemination of cultural heritage on the internet to eventually adopt the conventions and experience of net art. There is no reason to privilege the computer as a machine for the exhibition and distribution of media over the computer as a tool for media production or as a media storage device. All have the same potential to change existing cultural languages. And all have the same potential to leave culture as it is. Even if the latter is highly unlikely!

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